

Study Questions: *Oroonoko*

1. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is best classified as a romance, meaning in part that it deals with imagined worlds and heroic ideals rather than with gritty facts. Yet Behn's narrator insists that she is writing a true history. Is she? Is Behn's narrator asserting her right to redefine history, including its assumptions about truth and the nature of change in time?
2. Behn's subtitle, "The Royal Slave," is an oxymoron, meaning that two words in a pair contradict each other. How do Oroonoko's identities as a prince and a slave contradict with each other? How do the narrator's identities as a woman and a European conflict with each other?
3. *Oroonoko* unfolds in two settings, Surinam and Coramantien. Draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. On the left, write 5 adjectives that describe Surinam. On the right, write 5 adjectives that describe Coramantien. Do these places have anything in common? How do they differ?
4. The last word of Behn's novella (short novel) is "Imoinda," which is surprising if this book's hero is Oroonoko. What heroic values does Imoinda represent and how do these contrast with and perhaps contradict the heroic values associated with Oroonoko?
5. Both Oroonoko and Imoinda get new names in Surinam. Why? Oroonoko's new name identifies him with perhaps the greatest leader of the Roman Empire. Why and how is this name appropriate? How is Oroonoko actually disempowered by this new name?
6. Like Shakespeare, Behn presents honor as a defining feature of true humanity. In Shakespeare, honor is associated with European humanist values. Behn uses the word even more often than Shakespeare, typically in relation to Oroonoko. How is Oroonoko's honor manifested? Is it nothing but a virtue? How does Oroonoko's honor help Behn critique the European Christians who enslave Oroonoko?
7. Is Oroonoko right to lead his fellow slaves into rebellion? Why does he do it?
8. Why does Oroonoko ask for a pipe to smoke at the end of the novella?
9. In her introduction to our edition of *Oroonoko*, the literary historian Janet Todd points out that for 17th-century Europeans, race was not the marker of identity that it is today, and that even the new institution of slavery was not necessarily race-based. If this is true, what are the important markers of identity in *Oroonoko*? That is, what traits distinguish people from one another? Or are their differences decided by their place in a power structure?
10. *Oroonoko* ends with two ruined bodies. Behn describes the mutilation of each in graphic detail. Why so much detail? How does the ruin of these two royal bodies help promote the expansion of a European empire? What, if any, are that empire's values? How do these values conflict with the ones that Oroonoko and Imoinda represent? Which of these value systems does the narrator embrace?